



This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about lead. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-888-422-8737. This fact sheet is one in a series of summaries about hazardous substances and their health effects. It's important you understand this information because this substance may harm you. The effects of exposure to any hazardous substance depend on the dose, the duration, how you are exposed, personal traits and habits, and whether other chemicals are present.

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Exposure to lead can happen from breathing workplace air or dust, eating contaminated foods, or drinking contaminated water. Children can be exposed from eating lead-based paint chips or playing in contaminated soil. Lead can damage the nervous system, kidneys, and reproductive system. Lead has been found in at least 1,026 of 1,467 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

#### What is lead?

(Pronounced lěd)

Lead is a naturally occurring bluish-gray metal found in small amounts in the earth's crust. Lead can be found in all parts of our environment. Much of it comes from human activities including burning fossil fuels, mining, and manufacturing.

Lead has many different uses. It is used in the production of batteries, ammunition, metal products (solder and pipes), and devices to shield X-rays.

Because of health concerns, lead from gasoline, paints and ceramic products, caulking, and pipe solder has been dramatically reduced in recent years.

#### What happens to lead when it enters the environment?

- ☐ Lead itself does not break down, but lead compounds are changed by sunlight, air, and water.
- ☐ When lead is released to the air, it may travel long distances before settling to the ground.
- ☐ Once lead falls onto soil, it usually sticks to soil particles.
- ☐ Movement of lead from soil into groundwater will depend on the type of lead compound and the characteristics of the soil.
- ☐ Much of the lead in inner-city soils comes from old houses painted with lead-based paint.

#### How might I be exposed to lead?

- ☐ Eating food or drinking water that contains lead.
- ☐ Spending time in areas where lead-based paints have been used and are deteriorating.
- ☐ Working in a job where lead is used.
- ☐ Using health-care products or folk remedies that contain lead.
- ☐ Engaging in certain hobbies in which lead is used (for example, stained glass).

#### How can lead affect my health?

Lead can affect almost every organ and system in your body. The most sensitive is the central nervous system, particularly in children. Lead also damages kidneys and the reproductive system. The effects are the same whether it is breathed or swallowed.

At high levels, lead may decrease reaction time, cause weakness in fingers, wrists, or ankles, and possibly affect the memory. Lead may cause anemia, a disorder of the blood. It can also damage the male reproductive system. The connection between these effects and exposure to low levels of lead is uncertain.

#### How likely is lead to cause cancer?

The Department of Health and Human Services has determined that lead acetate and lead phosphate may reasonably